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SUBJECT: NORWAY'S 2008 AFGHANISTAN CONTRIBUTIONS

REF: STATE 19516

Classified By: Ambassador Benson Whitney
for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary

11. (C) Norway's Minister of Defense told Ambassador Whitney on February 28th that Norway had little more to give on Afghanistan. Afghanistan remains Norway's largest military commitment and with the 50 percent increase in aid for 2008 Afghanistan will become its leading aid recipient. No new military or development commitments from Norway should be expected this year. The vocal anti-war minority in Norway includes one member of the government coalition, has long dominated public discussion over Norway's Afghanistan commitments. The GON has only recently begun to clearly explain and defend the Afghanistan mission in public. This over-due public posture indicates a welcome long-term commitment, but with clear limits. End Summary

Norway out of Afghanistan Now!

12. (SBU) The Socialist Left Party (SV) has long opposed Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan and has worked (with significant successes) to minimize Norway's military contributions to ISAF. A January SV conference on Afghanistan heightened media attention on SV's opinions on Afghanistan and led to SV members calling for Norway to withdraw its troops and have the UN take over control from NATO. SV members, supported by other anti-war groups, claimed that problems with the Taliban are created by ISAF's offensive military strategies and, along with other leftist groups, organized marches to "Get Norway out of Afghanistan." Just as media attention was dying down, the January 14 attack on the Serena hotel in Kabul, with FM Stoere huddled in the basement, added a dramatic and tragic element to the public debate and kept the GON's Afghanistan policy on the front pages.

Labor Party Finally Speaks Out

13. (C) The GON has long used the vocal SV opposition to Afghanistan as an excuse for not increasing its contributions to ISAF. As recently as January 29 Norway's Development Minister (and SV member) Erik Solheim said (to U/S Burns) that Norwegian presence in Afghanistan was a "big, highly disputed political issue" and that the government would fall if Norwegian forces took large casualties. It is true that Afghanistan has been a big political issue in Norwegian politics, but this is largely self-inflicted, occurring primarily because of SV's threats to leave the GON's coalition and the Labor Party's unwillingness to confront SV or to defend the Afghan mission to the Norwegian public.

14. (SBU) Stoere's February 5 speech before Parliament therefore was one of the strongest signals any senior official has given that the GON understands and is willing to defend the necessity of the military aspects of Norway's Afghanistan contributions. Stoere stated that "we can not accept that Afghanistan again becomes a base for international terror." While stressing that only a comprehensive approach balancing military and development will succeed, Stoere stated that security is decisive. He went on to say that reducing the military presence would damage and weaken many of the positive signs seen in Afghanistan and that it is only NATO, through ISAF, which can provide the military force necessary. He also observed that through NATO allies and partners, one fifth of the world is participating in the effort. All of these points were aimed specifically (if belatedly) at objections that SV has raised to Norway's Afghanistan and ISAF participation.

15. (SBU) Despite strong opposition to Afghanistan from the left, public support for broad Norwegian involvement in Afghanistan has stayed steady at 50-60%. The degree of this support should not be overstated as it is shallow, based primarily on the impression that Norway's involvement is focused on peacekeeping and in humanitarian aid. This support would likely not continue if Norwegian forces suffered significant casualties. Until recently GON leaders have been reluctant to publicly explain why Norway is in Afghanistan or what the military role in Afghanistan is, leaving the debate to opponents. Other leaders, such as the President of Parliament, have spoken out about the need for additional military commitments to Afghanistan.

Details on Military Contributions

16. (SBU) In late November 2007 the GON was forced (by Dutch requests for help, pressure from SACEUR and others) to hold a divisive coalition debate over what military forces to commit to ISAF for 2008. An agreement was reached over additional troop deployments and the Parliamentary mandate for ISAF deployments was extended until the late fall of 2009 (after national elections scheduled for September). Norway's contributions include approximately 650 troops in Afghanistan, split between the PRT in Meymaneh, the QRF in Masar-e-Sharif and the National Contingent in Kabul. In the coming weeks 150 SOF will deploy to Kabul for 18 months. Norway will also increase the number of OMLT personnel from 10 to approximately 50 beginning in October. Although the QRF will stand down this summer, the PRT in Meymaneh will be reinforced by an infantry company and 3 rotary winged aircraft, leaving total troops deployed at around 500.

17. (C) So far, Norway has refused specific requests (from the Dutch last fall and from SecDef Gates before Vilnius) to send additional troops, particularly to the south of Afghanistan. The PM, FM and Defense Minister have all publicly said that Norway is doing its part, and does not have the capacity to contribute more, and that no additional troops will be sent in 2008. Our analysis shows that the Norwegian Army is particularly stretched and at most would be able to provide only a few additional OMLT teams. The Telemark battalion, requested by reftel is not available for deployment now. Elements of the Telemark are already in Afghanistan, filling in at the PRT due to a change in the training rotation of the regular battalions which are sent to Afghanistan. As a result, the Telemark will not be available for deployment as a unit until 2010, and deployment to Afghanistan then would remain problematic.

Response to our Demarche

18. (C) Thus, when the Ambassador met on February 28 with the Minister of Defense, Anne-Grete Strom-Erichsen, to present reftel points, most of the discussion revolved around the feasibility of any increase in troops. Strom-Erichsen shared the Ambassador's concern about the need for all allies to take our responsibilities for Afghanistan seriously and

contribute. Norway, she claimed, has done so providing a PRT where it was asked to do so and Special Operations troops in Kabul. Norway's previously announced increase of OMLT personnel from 10 to 50 is a sign of their commitment to the mission. She noted that Norwegian troops are training the ANA company in their PRT region and Norwegian police are working in their PRT and Kabul. Further, some Norwegian SOF are embedded in Afghan Ministry of Interior units. Finally, she mentioned the contribution of Norwegian helicopters which is expected to be a significant force multiplier.

¶9. (C) Strom-Erichsen appreciated the recent US contribution of marines and the critical support the U.S. provides in Afghanistan. She also appreciated the particular need for maneuver battalions. She repeated that parts of the Telemark Battalion are already in Afghanistan and thus the battalion as a whole cannot be sent. That battalion could only theoretically be considered for full deployment in the summer of 2010. She concluded saying that the only realistic exit strategy for Afghanistan would come through the training of the Afghan army. She promised that her staff would look again to see if a few extra people could be spared to contribute towards an OMLT, but was not optimistic. The Ambassador concluded the meeting by discussing the long-term need for Norway to be able to contribute more troops and military capacity and thus Norway must commit more funds to its military. Strom-Erichsen's staff responded that the government is looking to increase the size of the Norwegian army to better respond to this type of need.

Details on Development Contributions

¶10. (U) In contrast to the status quo in Norway's military contributions, the GON has announced a large increase in development and humanitarian aid, bringing 2008 assistance to \$140 million. This represents a substantial increase over 2007 levels and will be focused on school construction, rural development and humanitarian aid. The GON has committed to build 82 new schools in Faryab by the end of 2008, is contributing to many rural development and poverty reduction programs such as water, sanitation, micro-finance, roads, rule of law promotion, capacity building through the Civil Service Institute, anti-corruption efforts as well as developing a management framework for the oil and gas sector. In the humanitarian field the GON supports the UNHCR and the Red Cross and in strengthening UNAMA's coordination role.

¶11. (C) Strengthening the UN coordinator's role is also a priority for the GON. The MFA's political director Kai Eide has been mentioned for this UN coordinator position. Eide is knowledgeable about Afghanistan and has worked within the GON to push it to do more for Afghanistan.

Comment

¶12. (C) For 2008 it is very unlikely that the GON would agree to additional military deployments to Afghanistan. Not only is this a politically difficult issue but the Norwegian Army is severely stretched. In addition, the GON would much rather increase civilian aid, and to its credit has been doing so. Very recent GON willingness to publicly explain and defend the Afghanistan mission and reiteration of its long-term commitment are welcome.

WHITNEY